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Fighting Meth Use In Wyoming: What Actually Works

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The recent recommendation for a new centralized position to lead Wyoming's methamphetamine abuse effort ignored discussion of the significant steps the state has already made in dealing with this terrifying problem. Since 2001, the Wyoming Legislature has tackled the meth problem head-on, providing both direction and funding support for several state agencies to implement strategies designed to significantly reduce drug abuse.

Wyoming must do much more in the near future to fight meth abuse. We all agree on that. But in order to keep and grow the efforts that do work, it is worth noting the progress we have made.

Treating more people with better success

Since 2001, we have increased the treatment capacity for meth addicts by 67 percent, including expanded treatment options for women, adolescents and both men and women with children. We are providing more residential treatment and intensive outpatient options in more communities with more individuals completing treatment programs. For example, in 2005, we served more than 10,000 Wyoming clients with substance abuse treatment compared to only 6,000 people served in 2001.

The Wyoming Department of Health's Substance Abuse Division has adopted national standards, also considered "best practices," for the certification of treatment programs, and providers are required to comply with those standards. Providers must also use a standard national assessment system to evaluate the severity of addiction so that addicted individuals can be directed to the most effective treatment.

What is the value of increased treatment? Cost benefit studies consistently find the benefits (decreased crime, improved health, increased employment options, fewer family problems) far outweigh the costs of addiction treatment. Treatment helps those in recovery stay out of jail and helps people return to work. A recent Iowa study found that nearly 60 percent of meth clients were working fulltime six months after completing treatment, and almost 68 percent were working fulltime one year later.

Effective drug courts

Drug courts were created to break the cycle of alcohol and drug abuse, addiction and crime. These courts provide sentencing options for Wyoming judges and combine judicial supervision, drug testing, treatment, follow-up care and monitoring of drug court participants.

In 2002, there were 14 drug courts. We now have 23 drug courts monitoring more than 600 clients each year. Nationally and in Wyoming, drug courts are proven to lower rearrest and conviction rates and increase treatment compliance – an important point since treatment is 15 times less costly than incarceration for a drug-related crime.

How law enforcement helps

With support from the Wyoming Legislature, Wyoming has also bolstered its attack on the enforcement side of the meth problem. More than \$4.6 million has been granted to counties, communities, sheriff's offices, police departments, county attorneys and local community drug task forces to provide more law enforcement officers, prosecutors and public defenders to combat meth at the local level. Another half million dollars is being used for new juvenile probation officers and other juvenile workers.

Wyoming has enacted "precursor" laws that restrict the sale, distribution and possession of ephedrine and other drugs that can be used in the manufacturing of meth.

Among the most important actions this state has taken are to pass drug-endangered children legislation protecting children who are exposed to meth manufacturing and use, and to make a coordinated plan between law enforcement officials and social workers to keep children safe.

Prevention

Public awareness of meth's havoc on families, in our communities and for our employers has reached an all-time high. A 2005 poll found that more than 77 percent of Wyoming residents knew that methamphetamine was a serious problem in their communities. And we're making money available to those community efforts for their prevention campaigns. The most recent example is a \$49,000 grant to the Cheyenne Meth Initiative group for a comprehensive study of meth use in Laramie County.

Community initiatives

There is no question we must strengthen our prevention efforts and continue to support community activities. At the Department of Health, we are working with communities to learn how methamphetamine affects them and to be an active partner with local efforts to build sustainable initiatives to stop meth use in Wyoming.

In terms of aggressively fighting meth abuse in Wyoming, it may be a more effective use of time to engage in community discussions with local business leaders, law enforcement officials, health professionals and teachers about a community response to this problem than to debate the need for a "drug czar."

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